

Revolution and the Crisis of Temporality

An Interview with Yves Citton and Myriam Revault d'Allonnes

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The German historian Reinhart Koselleck associated the “age of revolutions” (1750-1850) with a fracture in the social representation of time. Are we currently experiencing a new fracture, as suggested by our constant recourse to the word “crisis”? *Books & Ideas* interviewed Yves Citton and Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, who have both reflected on the concept.

Yves Citton is the author of *Renverser l'insoutenable* [*Reversing the Unbearable*], Seuil, 2012, 212 p. Myriam Revault d'Allonnes has written *La Crise sans fin. Essai sur l'expérience moderne du temps* [*Crisis without End: An Essay on the Modern Experience of Time*], Seuil, La Couleur des idées, 2012.

Books & Ideas: Myriam Revault d'Allonnes, you have shown, quoting Rousseau (“We are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions”), that the concept of “crisis,” which is frequently used to describe our own era, was regularly used in the late eighteenth century. At that time, did “crisis” have the same meaning as today?

Myriam Revault d'Allonnes: The concept of crisis, which in our day is ubiquitous, entered ordinary speech only by shedding its original meaning. The Greek word *krisis* belongs to the field of medicine. It primarily means judgment, selection, separation, and decision. It refers to the decisive moment in an uncertain process, one that allows a diagnosis, a prognosis, and, possibly, a solution to the crisis. Thus a state of crisis is inseparable from the experience of time: whatever the context in which it is used, “crisis” implies temporality. It belongs to a particular regime of historicity, which a crisis is uniquely suited to reveal.

It is precisely in the eighteenth century that “crisis” freed itself from this more limited and technical sense (which in the Middle Ages had been essentially confined to medicine) and came to the forefront of modern thought, in connection with a new conception of history. Its introduction into modern thinking about temporality and historicity represents a significant shift, even a break. “Crisis” now meant a complete rupture, a radical negation of the old by the new in the name of a certain idea of progress. Not only did the term spread and come to refer to any period of trouble and tension, it was also tied to the emergence of a form of subjectivity that is sensitive to disorder and a consciousness of significant political and economic upheaval. Political crises thus have a specific relationship with the forms of historical thought with which they are associated.

The interest of Rousseau’s thought lies in the fact that he assigns crisis a political meaning, related to the reality of conflict, without tying it to a conception of dialectical progress, for

example in the Hegelian sense. It is worth recalling the entirety of the passage from which the quotation is drawn:

“You trust in the present order of society without thinking that this order is itself subject to inevitable revolutions, and it is impossible for you to foresee or prevent the one which may affect your children. The noble become commoners, the rich become poor, the monarch becomes the subject. Are the blows of fate so rare that you can count on being exempted from them? We are approaching a state of crisis and the age of revolutions. Who can answer for what will become of you then?”

This text emphasizes the unpredictability of the future, the course of which can never be known in advance, as well as the role of contingency in social and political conflict. Would revolutions and crises—they are linked in the text—be inevitable if the social and political order were not unjust and untenable? But “inevitable” does not mean “predictable,” for the future’s course is precisely not governed by the idea of infinite progress. Crises are jolts or ruptures; far from being absorbable into a universal future and knowable in advance, they can profoundly change history’s course. The great relevance of Rousseau’s thought lies in the way it works insecurity and uncertainty into its perspective on the historical future. Though crises and revolutions are fraught with often mortal risks, they can also be the occasion for positive turnarounds. For Rousseau, a “crisis” reveals the future’s ambivalence and fundamental uncertainty.

Yet the current use of the term breaks both with the original Greek meaning of *krisis* as well as with the representation of the historical future that emerged in the eighteenth century. Today, crisis seems to have become our “normal” condition—a regularity that is, moreover, characterized by the proliferation of uncertainties, relating to the causes, diagnoses, effects, and very possibility of a solution to the crisis. It is as if there was nothing left to settle or to decide, since crisis has become our permanent state. Now that its meaning has become so broad, crisis seems to have become the milieu and norm of our lives. This radical reversal is the sign of a profound transformation in our relationship to time—a relationship characterized by the future’s uncertainty but, unlike Rousseau, we seem to have lost our faith in the fruitfulness of temporal existence. This is why the perception of a general crisis to which there is no solution is linked to a crisis in our ability to project ourselves into the future.

Books & Ideas: Yves Citton, in your book *Renverser l’insoutenable*, you compare the privileges of the late eighteenth century with those of today. What conclusions do you draw from this comparison?

Yves Citton: It seems to me that, over the past few decades, we have allowed an entire array of inequalities to exacerbate, both within “rich” countries and at the global level. Of course, the wages of Chinese laborers working in export industries are increasing rapidly, and, yes, systems of social insurance are being established in places like China. Global inequalities are mitigated, at an aggregate level, when such statistically significant countries begin to catch up. But as one sees in the case of Foxconn’s workers, relative enrichment creates new tensions, which are discussed at length in an article in the January 2013 issue of the *Revue des Livres*. So despite some relatively encouraging signs from places like China, India, or Brazil, it still seems to me that our period is dominated by an exacerbation of inequalities (in terms of income, social protection, access to higher education and fulfilling jobs, and humanizing living conditions).

Aside from the fact that such exacerbation always has destabilizing effects, the combination of unjustifiable inequalities and a globalized media sphere, which bombards us with images that make these inequalities all the more glaring, with climate change which, in an increasingly near future, could force some populations into exile—all this seems to announce major, violent turmoil if we are not able to get ahead of these trends and radically change our course.

In this respect, we are indeed experiencing a “crisis of temporality.” We are witnessing, perhaps for the first time, the emergence over the medium term of the sufficient causes of potentially extremely violent social upheavals. Yet we are incapable of collectively creating the political organizations that would forestall these catastrophic outcomes. Our political temporality is out of sync with our social and environmental temporality, as Hartmut Rosa demonstrated in his book *Accélération* (La Découverte, 2010), and as I tried to explain in issue 46 of the journal *Multitudes* (2011).

Books & Ideas: In your view, does the contemporary use of the term “crisis” refer to a reality or a new collective imaginary?

Yves Citton: The ways in which the word “crisis” is currently used strikes me as pretty systematically misleading. The word functions as a “myth,” in every sense of the term. It suggests an implicit “history”: things were good, now they’re bad (i.e., we’re in a “crisis”), but they’ll get better. It is based on a “myth”: once the crisis that is slowing us down, holding us back, or, worse still, pushing us backwards is finally over, we’ll return once again to our usual cruising speed. Herein lies the key illusion: due to the hegemony of economic thinking over our political debates, a “crisis” is almost always conceived as a recession or stagnation in GDP. We are in a “crisis” because GDP is not growing. This blinds us to the fact that the real crisis, the imminent catastrophe, has nothing to do with our *speed*, i.e., the acceleration or deceleration of growth, but with our *direction*: the crucial question is not whether to go faster or slower, but in which direction we wish to reorient the growth of our productive forces.

The vast majority of contemporary discourse on the crisis is truly *criminal*. It bears enormous responsibility for the catastrophes that await us in the future, precisely because it serves to avoid the question of direction in the name of a return to acceleration (i.e., “full speed ahead with growth”). We cannot allow ourselves to take drastic measures to stop the destruction of our living environment “because of the crisis”—because the top priority must be unemployment, the budget deficit, the debt, the appeal of our financial sector, or other such nonsense ... We will start worrying about transitioning to a more sustainable way of life only once we are, once again, hurtling towards the abyss! Besides the fact that we will not return to 6% or 8% growth, the real problem, once again, is not growth or the speed at which we are moving, but our direction.

Myriam Revault d’Allonnes: The contemporary use of the word “crisis” represents a mutation in our relationship to time, but its generalization (in French) in the form of a collective singular—“*la crise*” (*the crisis*)—must be interrogated from several angles. First, that of its appropriateness: its epistemological appropriateness, but also its political appropriateness. The contemporary world has witnessed the unraveling of a number of modern historicity’s key features, which emerged and were first deployed in the eighteenth century. Modernity entailed, to use Koselleck’s term, the “temporalization” of historical experience. Because history was conceived as a process with a clear direction, in which the future represented progress’ realization, time was endowed with a historical quality: transformed into a dynamic force, time

itself became an historical actor. Time was the engine of still-to-be-completed history, of still-to-be-accomplished political endeavors. History no longer unfolded *in* time, but *through* time.

Today, however, we are confronted with a process of “detemporalization.” After the collapse of the widespread belief in progress and hopes in a future teleologically oriented towards improvement, we now inhabit a kind of promise-less time. The image that prevails at present is that of an inchoate and indeterminate future. This new way of being-in-time shapes both how society views its uncertain collective future and how individuals imagine the (equally uncertain) direction of their lives.

Even if some misleading uses of the word “crisis” are merely alibis (“it’s due to the crisis”) or efforts to justify policies that are incapable of addressing the explosion of inequalities and injustices, it would be a mistake to dismiss crisis as a figment of the collective imagination with no grounding in reality. The ubiquity of crisis testifies both to our new way of being-in-time—a new “image” of time—and a sense that politics will be defeated or prove impotent any time it confronts the speed and complexity of economic and technological forces. Political action no longer takes the form of initiative. It has become essentially reactive—to financial markets, ecological upheaval, and social and cultural change.

A distinctive characteristic of the concept of “crisis” is the tight connection it posits between objective reality and our experience of it. Crisis is modern man’s lived experience. If the idea of crisis expresses the difficulties contemporary humanity faces in defining its relation to history, it does not condemn us to uncertainty or resignation. The proliferation of discourses bemoaning political impotence and an impending end do not capture the full extent of our crisis’ meaning. For it also has a constraining force, which requires us to see it not as the culmination of an inevitable process but as the starting point of a string of reversals: how can we shift from seeing a number of uncertain ideas as discredited to considering them as possible sources of objective knowledge? How do we make sense of the fact that the crisis emerges ahead of itself—upstream from itself, as it were? Different subjective attitudes towards the future’s uncertainty could appear, one that would not be haunted by fear and insecurity. An uncertain future is above all one that is not prefigured in advance. If, at present, the future is a problem rather than a source or instrument of hope, it is because it has ceased to be desirable. It has become synonymous with insecurity. We confusedly project onto the future hopes and fears of all kinds. From an eschatological belief in a future that exists independently of us and lies beyond humanity’s reach, we turned to a conception of the future as domesticated and disciplined, and, now, to a future that strikes us as exceedingly opaque. The solution, however, does not lie in making deductions based on the presumption that history is a continuous process, nor in planning the future deterministically in order to escape its unpredictable character. Nor does it consist in projecting onto it an idealism that reverts to utopianism.

Books & Ideas: The historian Reinhart Koselleck saw a profound rupture in references to temporality among the contemporaries of the “age of revolutions.” Do you think that this shift in our relationship to time and crisis affects our understanding of revolutions?

Yves Citton: The word “revolution” is itself very loaded. It can also be a trap. As Lacan emphasized, along with many others, a “revolution” is something a heavenly body does, when it rotates and returns to its starting point. Moreover, our political tradition has a habit of treating revolutions as absolutes: to “have a revolution” is to change in a sudden, spectacular, and

irreversible way. The Arab Spring, at least in its early months, led us to believe that revolution was indeed possible: tyrants were forced out of power, corrupt regimes collapsed, the French cabinet ministers who supported them were shown to be the buffoons that they are, and forces that had previously been condemned to the opposition (in addition to suffering torture and prison) seized control of government palaces. So, yes, even if few people really believe in them, revolutions still exist in some way. So much the better.

Yet this raises as many questions as it solves. Are these kinds of revolution still possible for us? Is their fast-paced temporality not tied to the rigidity of existing power structures? There can be revolutions against dictatorships, but can there be revolutions against “representative democracies”—which would more accurately be described as “consumerist mediocracies”?

It seems to me that our relationship to the temporality of social change must be grasped in terms of *polyphasing*. Like a *mille-feuille* pastry, it consists of layers that evolve at their own pace and which only exceptionally change synchronously (moments that we call “revolutions”). The different forms and levels of power feed off our hopes, our fears, and our daily behavior. The latter is what we too often dismiss as “small gestures” (i.e., buying organic produce, not taking planes or watching television, organizing local distribution networks, decelerating, etc.). None of this, needless to see, is enough to be revolutionary: the radical redirection I discussed earlier requires taking the next step, i.e. collective action. We will have to “rise up,” and we can only rise up *together*. This requires at least some synchronizing, as I tried to demonstrate in issue 50 of *Multitudes*, devoted precisely to “uprisings” (*soulèvements*). Yet these small gestures are both the first steps and the ultimate achievements of truly significant revolutions. This is why they should not be scorned: they often occur below our political radar screens, yet they still matter a great deal, due to their cumulative effects. And I think we would be less prone to political despair if we saw these gestures in a more positive light.

That said, small gestures are clearly not enough. Temporality does indeed present an obstacle to releasing our “revolutionary” potential. A gesture can be reproduced and repeated, but, generally speaking, it does not “last.” Yet what counts is what lasts, and what the political forces that seek to redirect our social development lack is the ability to last, to persist over time. What we call the (far) left suffers from a cardinal vice: for the past fifty years, it has wasted its time on internal schisms, disputes, and shouting matches, leaving it divided and weak. The left regards consensus and compromise with suspicion, even scorn. Consequently, it is chronically unable to organize itself—to establish organizations that can bring together different groups and channel them into a force that could change the course of our collective destiny.

An entirely new culture must be invented, not in a vacuum, not through abstract ideas, but from within the new ways of life that revolutionary forms of media have made possible. Fred Turner’s book, on the transition *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, demonstrates that online network activism resulted from the geographic dispersal of hippie communities in the late 1970s: people got tired of arguing over who would wash the dishes and clean the bathroom (it’s always the same ones!), so they each went off to their own little homes, but developed computer tools so that they could stay in touch without leaving the house. We can all think of conversations that would have remained mostly calm had they occurred face-to-face, but which degenerated because they took place over email. We do not (yet) have the gestures, sensibility, and habits to prevent us from squabbling via our keyboards and screens (like we once did over the dishes and

bathroom). All this will take time, but it must happen if we are to “rise up together” in the new conditions of communication and collective action that characterize our age.

Consequently, I would break down the question of “revolutions” (a word that strikes me as rather obsolete and that does not necessarily need to be resurrected) into two problems, which *make use* of small personal gestures while *going beyond* them: on the one hand, *rising up* (one can only rise up as a group) and, on the other, *organizing* (once one has risen up, one cannot stay up without organization, which means compromise and agreement). An uprising can only *last* and have lasting effects to the extent that new forms of organization engage with the real world in order to reshape it over the medium and long term (even if staying power can lead to rigidity, which is always frustrating). The force of the “revolutions” of 1968 was not the specific event itself, as inspirational as it was, but what happened after the event—the little organizations that continued to exist for a number of years afterwards (communes, associations, periodicals, the Cerfi¹, etc.).

The point is not to advocate a return to temporality, the rigidities of “democratic centralism,” or Trotskyism, but rather to mobilize our efforts in ways that take into account the polyphased and polycentric character of our socio-political life. We need to invent multilayered structures that allow the upper layers to change quickly while others remain fairly stable. We must learn from the fact that, as Elinor Ostrom has clearly demonstrated, only structures that are polycentric and organized into several levels can grapple effectively with the complexity of our shared world (on this issue, see the excellent interview with Ostrom in the journal *Ecologie et Politique* 41, 2011, pp. 111-121).

The first requirement of any future “revolution” could well be the rejection of the very title of this interview. When we speak of a “crisis of *temporality*,” we blind ourselves to the most pressing imperative: to replace the singular with the plural, to realize that there is not *one* political temporality, but rather that political change only occurs in phases which cannot be superimposed upon one another. We must learn to analyze and imagine the diversity of *temporalities* that are tied to uprisings and the ways in which we organize our shared world.

Myriam Revault d’Allonnes: I do not believe that the critical question is that of our perception of revolutions. Koselleck, speaking of the “age of revolutions,” showed that “revolution” became, in this period, like “history” itself, a collective singular. Needless to say, the consequences of this changing relationship to time, particularly as they relate to the concept of revolution, are, politically speaking, considerable. But this did not begin at the moment when “crisis” became ubiquitous. The totalitarian experience had already rendered suspect both the concept and its correlates (i.e., the “new man,” the supposed end of exploitation and domination, etc.).

These points aside, the very concept of “revolution” is problematic in a number of respects. The modern revolutions of the eighteenth century (i.e., the American and the French Revolutions) abandoned the cyclical definition associated with astronomical revolutions. As Hannah Arendt argues in *On Revolution*, the modern meaning of revolution implies a radical break with the old

¹ Cerfi stands for Centre d’études, de recherches et de formation institutionnelles (Center for Institutional Studies, Research, and Training), a French research collective that existed from 1967 to 1987 under the direction of Félix Guatarri.

order and the birth of a new world. These revolutions rested on the belief that the course of history would suddenly start anew, and that an entirely new history, a history that “has never been known or told before,” was beginning. It was a number of background assumptions about temporality or historicity, notably a progressive teleology and a belief in a brighter future, which led these revolutionaries to believe they could inaugurate a new age. At present, these beliefs no longer exist: the vanishing of the expectations tied to humanity’s capacity for self-realization and the fading of age-old hopes have ushered in an a-teleological framework in which the future seems inchoate and indeterminate. The very idea of emancipation must be reconceived independently from the classic revolutionary framework.

I am not convinced that the term “revolutionary” should be applied, for instance, to the liberation movements that recently emerged in the Arab world. Rather, they were revolts, insurrections, and liberation movements directed against authoritarian and despotic regimes. Liberation, however, does not automatically entail the institution (or institutionalization) of liberty. While democratic demands (in Egypt and particularly Tunisia) played a decisive role in these movements, the difficulties these countries currently face have arisen, for the most part, from obstacles that have emerged to the democratizing process.

The question, at present, is not what conception of “revolution” we should have in light of the “crisis.” Rather, it is to envision a new relationship to the new future, notably (and especially) from the standpoint of political thought and action. Within the dynamic of democracy, there exist, I believe, unexplored resources, agonistic forms of discussion and contestation. From this perspective, the contemporary disenchantment with many traditional political forms and a preference for original but often indefinable forms of expression may be less the sign of a complete disinterest in politics than the first draft of a new political practice, as suggested by the proliferation of petition drives, civic forums, activist groups, etc. The point is not to promote a politics of “defiance” advocating contestation of various kinds. This way of articulating things is, in my view, too restrictive, as it favors protest rather than positive mobilization, indignation over hope, and refusal instead of endorsing a real political project. Aside from the fact that the mobilization of purely negative energies is often condemned to failure (as with indignation or demands made in the name of victimhood), true counter-powers do not act merely through hindrance or oversight, but display a genuine capacity for initiative: they not only place limits on established mechanisms, they help to strengthen and above all to recreate democracy. The new stakes we face are also genuine challenges: ecology, technological innovation, the role of finance, etc. There are also social challenges, such as the effective recognition of gender parity, homosexuality, and problems relating to procreation and child-bearing. These developments and changes offer opportunities for renewal: fifty years ago, no one would ever have imagined that it was the business of politics to take on the question of the family. Rather than a retreat from politics (or a falling back on so-called “social” questions), we are witnessing an extension of the scope of public affairs. The fact that our democracies are beset with new questions that they are called upon to resolve may be an opportunity rather than a problem—and the same holds true for the potential invention (or reinvention) of new practices and new forms of action, which would undoubtedly be linked to new subjective dispositions.

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